DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 680 SP 036 020

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TITLE Preservice Teachers and Culturally Diverse Families: How Do They Perceive One Another?
PUB DATE 9 Nov 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Nashville, TN, November 9, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Pluralism; Elementary Education; *Family Attitudes; Family School Relationship; Higher Education; Multicultural Education; Preservice Teacher Education; *Student Teacher Attitudes; Student Teachers; *Teacher Education Curriculum; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Diversity (Student); Preservice Teachers; United States (Southeast)

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a study that explored the concerns and perceptions of culturally diverse families and the attitudes of preservice teachers toward students from culturally diverse families. To begin with, a qualitative study was conducted in which five international families and six American families were interviewed to examine concerns of parents who have their children in a culturally diverse setting. A descriptive quantitative study followed to determine if elementary preservice teachers were culturally sensitive as a total group to the culturally diverse families. The Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory (CDAI) was used to determine the level of sensitivity of 637 preservice teachers who were enrolled in the student teaching phase of elementary teacher education programs. Findings included the following: (1) international families were concerned that their culture be maintained through opportunities for their children to eat native food, practice native customs, and practice the family's native language, though they also allowed their children to participate in American cultural activities; and (2) the elementary preservice teachers were culturally sensitive in the area of the culturally diverse family with an overall mean score of 3.62. The paper includes discussion of implications and recommendations for preservice teacher education program change. (Contains 26 references.) (JB)

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ED 383 680

PRESERVICE TEACHERS AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES: HOW DO THEY PERCEIVE ONE ANOTHER?

by

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a paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association

November 9, 1994

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INTRODUCTION

Our nation's population is quickly changing and becoming more diverse. Between 1980 and 1990 the United States' population increased by 10%. During this decade the white population increased 8%, the black population 16%, the Hispanic population 44%, and the Asian population and others 65% (Hodgkinson, 1991). As a result of the change of our societal make-up, the demographic trends for the nation's public schools are also changing for both students and teachers. The minority student population is increasing when the racial composition of the teacher population is becoming more nonminority (Larke, 1990). Graham (1987) predicted that the population of school children will be 40% nonwhite by the year 2000.

Rodriguez (1984) claimed that preservice teachers may be unprepared to meet the challenges of diversity they will face in their future classrooms. Olstad, Foster, and Wyman (1983) suggested that teachers who lack multicultural education in the preservice preparation program will not be prepared to deal with diversity in the classroom and will have low expectations of minority students.

According to Larke (1990), teachers need to be more culturally sensitive to all students, regardless of diverse backgrounds. Grottkau and Nickolai-Mays (1989) stated that the knowledge and experience of cultural pluralism was a vital ingredient of teacher education programs. They went on to suggest that in-depth and prolonged exposure to cultural pluralism in preservice teacher education programs could bring about the hope that a cognitive and affective foundation would be developed in the preservice teacher. Pine and Hilliard (1990) recommended that preservice teachers be prepared to handle individual differences and incorporate them into creating a positive learning environment that enhances all children and their needs. Therefore, the education of preservice teachers to become more culturally sensitive is a challenge that faces most teacher education programs.

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education proposed the following goals for teacher education:

1. teaching values that support cultural diversity,
2. encouraging the expansion of existing cultures as well as their incorporation, into the mainstream,
3. supporting alternative life styles, and
4. encouraging multilingualism and multidialectism (AACTE, 1989, p. 2).

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has also established standards for multicultural education and has defined the multicultural perspective as ". . . a recognition of (1) the social, political, and economic realities that individuals experience in culturally diverse and complex human encounters and (2) the importance of culture, race, sex and gender, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and exceptionalities in the education process" (NCATE, 1992 p. 65). However, Haberman and Post (1990) believed there were few, if any, teacher education programs that were effectively meeting this vital need of preparing individuals for life in a multicultural society. Graham stated that this could possibly lead to a cultural misunderstanding between the teachers and learners. He recommended that postsecondary educatory take heed and establish firm commitments to programs in multicultural education that will prepare future teachers to deal effectively with cultural diversity.

Need for the Study

A need is being created for elementary preservice teachers to be more culturally sensitive to groups of children with backgrounds different from their own. This is due to the fact that recent reports (Clabaugh, 1989); Graham, 1987; Haberman & Post, 1990) cited that the composition of the student population is becoming more minority while the teacher population is rapidly becoming nonminority. Historically, colleges of education have prepared their preservice teachers to work effectively with one group of students--that being the dominant culture of middle class.

Studies (Grottkau & Nickolai-Mays, 1989) (Haberman & Post, 1990) have shown that preservice teachers who are not trained in multicultural education have low expectations for minority students. If preservice teachers are not trained to be sensitive in meeting the needs of all learners, cultural misunderstandings could result between the teacher and learner (Graham, 1987). Furthermore, Ramsey (1987) stated that when there is not a shared cultural understanding between teachers and parents, disagreements often reflect different social priorities. Teacher education programs must begin preparing preservice teachers for a multicultural society (Haberman & Post, 1990).

Study

A qualitative study was conducted and five International families and six American families were interviewed to examine concerns of parents who have their children in a culturally diverse setting. A descriptive quantitative study followed to determine if elementary preservice teachers are culturally sensitive as a total group to the culturally diverse family. The Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory (CDAI), developed by Gertrude Henry in 1991, was used to determine the level of sensitivity. The population consisted of 637 preservice teachers who were enrolled in the student teaching phase of elementary teacher education program throughout the southeast.

Findings

The International families indicated there was an adjustment to the culture when they first came to the United States. The amount of adjustment required varied from culture to culture though all International families indicated there was some adjustment to the new culture.

There was concern among International families that their culture be maintained. One important part of the International communities' culture is food. The opportunity for their children to eat their native food at school as well as at home was important. The opportunity to practice native customs was also important. International families practiced native customs but also

allowed their children to participate in American cultural activities in the preschool and community.

Maintaining the family's native language was also important. International families viewed language as a very important part of their culture and were concerned that their children would forget their native language. Therefore, International parents continued to speak their native language at home and encourage their children to do so.

In the descriptive quantitative study that followed, elementary preservice teachers were culturally sensitive in the area of the cultural diverse family with an overall mean score of 3.62. The specific survey item, "Necessary to include parent input in program planning," indicated that this item had the highest mean sensitivity score of 4.27. The item with the lowest mean sensitivity score of 2.91 was "During initial meetings, teachers should ask families their preference for ethnic identification" which indicated that elementary preservice teachers were the least culturally sensitive on this item of the survey.

Of all the individual items on the Cultural Diversity Awareness Inventory, the lowest mean score indicating the lowest level of sensitivity was "In asking families of diverse cultures how they wish to be identified" in the area of Culturally Diverse Family. This finding is consistent with studies that teachers have difficulties in establishing successful relationships between minority families, children, and themselves (Bennett, 1986; Brownlee, 1989).

Role of the Educator

Educators need to be "aware of cultural differences and to recognize that not every one shares our values and beliefs and that <u>different from</u> does not mean <u>less than</u>" (DiMartino 1989, p. 32). Dixon and Fraser (1986) suggested that teachers have an understanding of the child's home life, such as: the language spoken in the home; who constitutes the family living in the home; and what beliefs and practices are important to the family.

It is assumed that children are taught beliefs by the family. When they enter school, however, new beliefs may be taught and these beliefs may conflict, resulting in confusion and sometimes anxiety. Ramsey (1987) stated that fear of the unknown will cause parents to resist sending their children to school in an unfamiliar place with different people. Pizzilo (1983) indicated the necessity to understand the beliefs the family attempts to pass on to children. Furthermore, this anxiety may even exist with the parents.

Schools blame parents when there are misunderstanding about attitudes and conduct. School involvement of parents, however, tends to reduce misunderstanding. As Cummings (1986) stated, "When educators involve minority parents as partners in their children's education, parents appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to children, with positive academic consequences (p. 26). There is the need, therefore, to understand parental perceptions and concerns and to involve parents in school affairs if we are going to educate students effectively.

Teachers play an important role in the development of children in the classroom. Therefore, they must consider concerns of other cultures. A positive attitude toward cultures different from the teacher's and an acceptance of cultures different from the teacher's is a necessity. They can intentionally or unintentionally pass on their on attitudes and values to children. Kendall (1983) suggested that when teachers are committed to multiculturalism, they will design the entire classroom to reflect the reality of multiculturalism. The attitude of the teacher is crucial to the success of multicultural education. Kendall noted that research shows there is a strong positive relationship between children's perceptions of the teacher's feelings about themselves and the children's own perceptions of the worth or value of themselves.

Because of the importance of teachers in a successful multicultural program, the need for preparing preservice teachers in this area is of great importance. The literature revealed that educating preservice teachers is a challenge that faces most teacher education programs (Larke, 1990).

Preservice teachers must be prepared to teach in an environment in which multicultural education is very likely to be a real commitment in the educational process as we approach the 21st century (Lopez & Vogel, 1979). In preparing the preservice teacher, higher education must be at the center of shaping attitudes and beliefs in today's culturally diverse youth. Global education (Lamy, 1983) prepares preservice teachers to attain a positive attitude toward a culturally diverse population.

Preservice teacher education programs need to prepare their students in the same manner. They need to be immersed in cultures different from their own. They need to be given concrete experiences with interacting positively with other cultures. They need opportunities to create positive environments for all children. Preservice teachers need to be given the same experiences that you would give veteran teachers in creating a change within their system.

Kalectaca (1974) suggested that traditional teacher education programs are not preparing preservice teachers to teach and cope effectively with a culturally diverse student population. In meeting cultural differences, there are alternative ways in looking at and solving problems. "Multicultural education should develop teachers who will deeply respect culturally differences which can contribute positively to American education by providing cultural experiences and enrichment to other ethnic groups" (p. 223).

Hilliard (1974) suggested as teachers gain in-depth experiences with people from other cultures, their attitudes can become more positive. Certain attitudes should emerge among teachers who are working cross-culturally. Examples of these attitudes: continuous self-examination; free of bias; and honor and value of cultural alternatives such as language, belief, values, and behaviors. He also felt that teachers must believe that a multicultural orientation is beneficial to them personally.

Teachers should teach children to respect values and cultures different from their own. Children should be taught how to cope and function successfully within a multicultural, multiracial society. Children should be

helped to experience in positive ways their cultural differences as well as their similarities as human beings.

Therefore, the need for developing sensitivity to culturally diverse families and children is of the utmost importance. According to Swick, Boutte, and Van Scoy (1994), there are experiences that can be informal in nature and be extremely effective in working with families. There are three categories that are suggested to support culturally diverse learning: "parent education and support, school-family curriculum activities, and teacher-parent partnership efforts" (p 19). These are recommended over utilizing isolated, periodic units which can bring about the tourist approach to cultural diversity.

Developing strategies for sharing and communicating with families is crucial to creating a culturally sensitive environment for children and their families. There are several items to consider. Is there an environment of support, caring, and trust within your classroom and school? If not, this must become one of the first priorities to work on. In creating communication between families and teachers, schedule meeting times where families can share of themselves. Derman-Sparks and Jones (1992) suggests that "family albums" facilitate this discussion. Questions such as, "Tell us about your family and culture and neighborhood, your experiences with differences" (Derman-Sparks & Jones, 1992, p 17). Questions that explore and construct a foundation of trust and acceptance between teacher and family are essential ingredients to creating an antibias environment.

The goals, backgrounds, and strengths of individual families must be acknowledged and respected by teachers and the school itself. Many times there are gaps between the home and school. In bridging the gaps, the sensitivity of the teacher to the multiple facets of cultural differences in families and their children is crucial. Teachers must be effective role models through their attitudes, actions and interactions with their children and families. Communication and interaction between the teacher and family can be the most powerful tool in creating a culturally sensitive environment.

Some activities that foster positive results through the interactions between teachers and families are: collaboration efforts between schools and families; creating discussion groups that center around cultural experiences; activities that celebrate cultural diversity; and families sharing their resources and talents through activities in the school curriculum.

Within the classroom and into the homes, children's literature can be a wonderful tool to support cultural diversity. It can be used as a foundation for problem solving critical issues. One idea is to create "thematic bags" that include a children's literature book with teachable activities included that the family can use to interact with the child at home. These can be used as a tool to bridge the children and families to school.

Being supportive of families is crucial to bridging the gaps between schools and homes. Encouraging families to contribute to the curriculum and the overall program seems to be beneficial. The messages sent out from the interactions between the teacher and family, the classroom environment, and the activities selected in the classroom can be powerful messages into the homes. It is the teachers' responsibility to communicate respect for others and the environment and materials are also sensitive and respectful of diversity.

Because of the importance of culture to all families, teachers must become aware of differences and be accepting of those differences. Therefore, the focus on working with the culturally diverse family is an area that needs attention. Additional studies should be conducted before preservice teachers enter the program and after they complete the program to determine levels of cultural sensitivity among the teachers who are teaching our children.

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